

**“APOCALYPSE SOON”****“Sardis: The Church of the Living Dead” (Revelation 3:1-6)**

The fifth epistle on this circuit was sent to the Church at Sardis. It received one of the most critical letters from the Head of the Church. The Church at Sardis seems to have been in a worse spiritual condition than all the others we have read about so far. Ephesus had lost its first love, Pergamos and Thyatira tolerated compromise, but Sardis was pronounced dead by the Lord. The other churches may have had failures but at least they still were alive!

Sardis represents the churches that exist throughout history right up to the present that appear to be alive and functioning, but are really spiritually dead. They may go through the exercises of dead formal ritualism and religion, but there is no life there. Such churches are those, *“having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof”* (2 Timothy 3:5). Jesus Christ knows perfectly what a church *is* and what a church *does*. We can hide nothing from the omniscient Head of the Church. Dennis Lyle pointedly remarks,

“Tragically, many churches are dead. Like the rotting carcass of Lazarus, these church bodies have the foul stench of death upon them. They have the appearance of life, but they are in actuality, dead. Their sanctuary is *A Morgue with a Steeple*. They are congregations of corpses. They have undertakers for ushers. Embalmers for elders. And morticians for ministers. Their pastor graduated from the Cemetery. The choir master is the local coroner. They sing, *“Embalmed in Gilead.”*”

Sardis was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. Sardis was very wealthy because of the abundance of gold taken from a nearby river. Its most famous king, Croesus rode in a gold chariot and his name lives on in the saying *“as rich as Croesus.”* As a consequence of such wealth coupled with idolatry, the city was famed for its decadent and immoral lifestyles. Geographically, the city was located some 1,500 feet above the valley floor in an almost inaccessible acropolis. On three sides it was surrounded by steep cliffs, which made it almost impossible to scale. The only way to the city was through a narrow path of approach. With such natural defences, it bred a complacent spirit of invincibility among the people there. Often they did not post guards to watch its defences. However, through this arrogant overconfidence and carelessness twice in its history invaders scaling a secret path up the cliff captured it.

**(1) THE CONDEMNATION OF THIS CHURCH (v1-2)**

Christ introduces Himself as, *“He that bath the seven Spirits of God”* (v1) which is similar to the description in Revelation 1:4. The *“seven Spirits of God”* is likely a reference to the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son to the believer (cf. John 15:26; Zechariah 4:10). Walvoord comments that it is, *“an apparent allusion to the sevenfold character of the Holy Spirit as resting upon Christ according to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:2-5.”* A dead or dying church needs the fullness of the Spirit of God to convict and revive them. There is no lack of power in God to make the dry bones live. There is no immediate commendation of this church in a corporate sense. Instead, the Master passes direct to condemnation in a spiritual autopsy.

## REPUTATION

This church evidently had an impressive historical reputation, “*that thou hast a name that thou livest*” (v1). Doubtless, they prided themselves on their illustrious past. They enjoyed their reputation as being a church that others envied for its spiritual life. Almost all liberal churches today began in days of revival blessing as evangelical churches. Today, we see around us churches that have a great history, but now have drifted far beyond the teaching and practice that they were founded upon. Yes, the members boast about their past and even celebrate it, but they do not resemble it in any way in their church lives. The preacher, Vance Havner articulated once that every spiritual ministry tends to go through four phases, “*A Man, A Movement, A Machine, and A Monument.*” Sardis was at the Monument stage.

The church at Sardis still engaged in “*works*” (v1), but these were simply powerless religious acts. So, despite the fact that they had died spiritually, the mechanics of organised religion continued functioning. This was an active, dynamic, church with many activities and programs geared for all the family. No doubt they had a beautiful multi-purpose sanctuary that was just a well-kept mausoleum. They may have had an eloquent educated preacher but there was no power or unction. Sardis had a “*form of godliness, but denying the power thereof*” (2 Timothy 3:5). It was truly the “Ichabod Memorial Church of the Living Dead.”

## REALITY

The reality of churches as Christ sees them can often be very different from what others see. God is not persuaded by the reputation a church has in the public domain. A good reputation in the world will not keep you out of hell! The believers at Smyrna were blasphemed and slandered by the apostate religious world, but Christ had a high opinion of them. At Sardis the Master acknowledges they had a name in the past but He pronounces, “*and art dead.*” (v1) He sees them for what they really *were* – a church in a coffin! The Sardis church was a relic of the past. It was like a museum of stuffed animals. They looked alive in the displays but inwardly they were dead. A good heritage and past reputation are a blessing, but they cannot substitute the reality of life in the present.

Death is characterised by separation and the absence of life. Now, a church is dead when they are spiritually dead because of a lack of saving faith, “*And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1) and “*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death*” (1 John 3:14). We can only conclude that sin had killed this church. It was a church dominated by tares rather than wheat. They were like those referred to in Matthew 7, “*Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.*” (Matthew 7:22-23)

Christ does not pinpoint exactly the cause of the death of this church. It is notable that there is no record of the church having to endure persecution or the prominence of famous false teachers. This was likely because they were no threat to the kingdom of darkness, as the devil never wastes time attacking something that can do him no harm. As a spiritual graveyard of inoffensive Christianity, they had the peace of the dead. As one writer said, they were “content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and a depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting.” A church may have impressive buildings, swollen membership rolls, large balance sheets, thriving ministries, and big

reputations in the community around them. That is not the test of whether it is dead or alive spiritually. Religion can be especially deceptive. Often, the easiest people to deceive are ourselves! We can be like Samson: believing that God is with us because of the past but, "*wist not that the LORD was departed from him*" (Judges 16:20). Campbell Morgan comments,

"He who seeks first for the inward life, finds nothing to satisfy His heart in this church. Scaffolding is of no value to Him if the building be making no progress behind it. The whiteness of a sepulchre does not attract Him if within there be nothing but dead bones. He seeks always for the inward, and only for the outward as it continues to be the expression of the inward. The breaking of bread is nothing save as there is the spiritual feeding upon Himself. The meeting for worship is valueless save as through the externals, the soul passes into communion with Him. Gifts are not accepted when they are the mere observance of a duty, and not the expression of the heart's adoration. The life which expresses itself in love was absent, and so the church lacked what would be acceptable to Christ, and would satisfy for all the toil He had endured to win it for Himself."

### (2) THE COMMENDATION OF THIS CHURCH (v4)

There was little that Christ could commend in this church. It was in a critical condition on the verge of extinction. However, despite the spiritual deadness of this church, remarkably Christ identifies a faithful remnant of wheat amidst the tares, "*Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy*" (v4).

God will never leave Himself without witnesses in this world. He will build His church amidst the ruins of the church of the tares! Doubtless, they were spiritually malnourished, isolated, and grieved by the deadness around them. They would have experienced what Lot did in Sodom, "*For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds*" (2 Peter 2:8). These people were the only positive note in this church and the only glimmer of hope. They had not defiled themselves in the sinful corruption there, which implies that the rest had.

### (3) THE COUNSEL TO THIS CHURCH (v3-6)

The Lord has a counsel for this church at Sardis for spiritual restoration and reformation. He is particularly addressing the remnant for there is no point in talking to the unbelieving corpses who are dead. The Saviour encourages the true remnant not to give up just because most are dead around them, "*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent*" (v2-3a). This expression "*be watchful*" means to "wake up" or "get awake." Clearly, they had spiritual lethargy and needed to wake up (1 Peter 5:8). Sin tends to make us lose sight of the right perspective. They needed to then live up to the spiritual graces that they had left in this church and, "*strengthen the things which remain.*" (v2) They needed to stabilize their spiritual testimony. Christ uses the imperative mood to demonstrate the need of urgency for them to do so. They did some works but inconsistently, "*for I have not found thy works perfect before God.*"(v2) This word, "*perfect*" means completed. God is not impressed by such variability as, "*A double minded man is unstable in all his ways*" (James 1:8). D. L. Moody used to remark, "*I would rather say, this one thing I do, than say these forty things I dabble with.*"

The next step the Master instructs them is to call to remembrance the glorious days of the past, when God was speaking to them through the Word of God by what they, “*received and heard.*” (v3) They needed then to hold on to these principles they once believed by obedience. Spiritual regression always occurs when we stop applying the principles of God’s Word to our lives. Where these people at Sardis had failed subsequently and been disobedient, they must “*repent.*” The evidence of true repentance is by manifesting the fruits of obedience (Matthew 3:8).

Now, the Lord warns them that if they ignore this window of opportunity, He will deal with them. He says, “*If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee?*” (v3). We are not told the exact detail of what judgment Christ will pour out on them. Temporal judgment can take on many different forms. One of the most significant is when God simply abandons a church and removes His glorious presence from their midst.

It seems the Lord is utilising the past history of Sardis to illustrate the real and urgent threat of judgment. On at least two occasions, invaders ascending the steep cliff faces came as an unexpected thief in the night and had captured the city. The complacency to appoint watchmen allowed this. Christ is urging the watchmen of Sardis to wake up lest the enemy destroy the remainder of the dying and decaying church there. He is reminding them to keep the imminence of Christ’s return in their thoughts, which will be as the thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; 2 Peter 3:10). The Lord’s return should bring joy and hope for a church, but for dead churches it will only be a fearful judgment. The beloved apostle tells us there are contrasting emotions of confidence or shame for a church and a Christian when the Lord returns, “*And now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.*” (1 John 2:28)

The Saviour goes on to offer this promise, “*He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels*” (v5) Now the statement, “*I will not blot out his name out of the book of life*” has caused much confusion as some have argued that it means that we could potentially lose our salvation. MacArthur makes a pointed rejoinder,

“People will say to me, “Does this mean that God might erase my name from the Book of Life?” I can’t believe people ask that question because the verse says, “I will not erase his name from the Book of Life.” What would make someone think that He might when He just said He won’t? How can you turn a promise into a threat?.....In John’s day, a king always kept a register. If a man committed a crime against the state, or if he died, his name was erased. So they always kept the register of the city accurate. When you died, your name was erased, you were taken off the roll. Or if you committed a crime you were erased, your name was taken off the roll. Christ is saying the king, the mayor, whoever runs your city might take your name off the list for something you've done, but, believe Me, I will never take your name off My list.”

We need to remind ourselves also that the one who “*overcometh*” is simply the true Christian who believes in Jesus Christ, “*For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?*” (1 John 5:4-5) So, what Christ is promising the faithful remnant that if they persevere on evidencing that they have the true root of faith, their name cannot be removed from the Book of Life and He will confess their name, “*before My Father, and before His angels,*” (v5)

as He promised in Matthew 10:32. We get a glimpse of this when Christ stood to welcome Stephen in Acts 7:56.

### CONCLUSION

We should never forget that these churches were real historical churches. All the messages to these churches are just as relevant to us as to those in the first century. Human nature has not changed so we must utilize these letters as mirrors to test and try our own churches. It should also check our own personal walk with God, for what is true of the Church is equally true of the individual. A golden past is not a guarantee of a golden future. Churches can become spiritually dead with the corruption of sin. John MacArthur gives some examples of dangers signs that a church is dying,

- (1) **Sit on its past laurels;**
- (2) **Concerned with liturgical forms rather than spiritual reality;**
- (3) **Focus on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ;**
- (4) **More concerned with what men think than what God said;**
- (5) **When it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God;**
- (6) **Lose its own conviction that every Word of the Bible is the Word of God Himself.**

There were two distinct groups in this church at Sardis – the living dead and the sleeping remnant. *Are you in either category?* If you are spiritually dead you need to repent and get saved. If you are sleeping you also need to repent and waken up. Religion and past reputation do not save. This is the truth that needs to be proclaimed to the dying churches around us. Sad to say, active churches with a big reputation are the most difficult to convince that they are spiritually dying.

There is no greater tragedy than a church where the light and life of Christ should be shining to a world in darkness is actually promoting that darkness. *Is our church simply living on the reputation of the past? Do we emotionally recollect the memory of great men and the excitement of former days, yet live in spiritual apathy today? Do we have more appetite for the television than spiritual vision? Do we just talk about the "old paths" but forget to follow them? Are we shining forth the light of Christ or are we just a spiritual social club or a family activity centre?*

It is not as we imagine ourselves to be but as we really are. *When Christ looks at you today, what does He see?* It is not just what we were yesterday, but what we are today. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (v6) – *Are We Listening?*